AREAS OF WORKLIFE: A STRUCTURED APPROACH TO ORGANIZATIONAL PREDICTORS OF JOB BURNOUT

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ABSTRACT

This chapter evaluates a model of the organizational context of burnout with direct reference to a new measure, the Areas of Worklife Scale (AWS). The model proposes a structured framework for considering six areas of worklife – workload, control, reward, community, fairness, and values – that have resonated through the literature on burnout over the previous two decades. The chapter presents extensive data on the AWS, testing a model of the six areas' interrelationships as well as their overall relationship to the three aspects of burnout. The results of these analyses are discussed in reference to the psychometric qualities of the measure and the implications of a structured approach to work environments for future development of research on burnout. Implications for developing workplace interventions are also considered.

INTRODUCTION

For several decades, the term "burnout" has been used to describe a fundamental disconnect between the worker and the workplace. The basic story goes like this:

the worker entered a job with positive expectations, enthusiasm, and the goal to be successful in the job. Over time, things changed – and now the worker has an overwhelming exhaustion; feelings of frustration, anger and cynicism; and a sense of ineffectiveness and failure. The initial flame has burned out. The experience impairs both personal and social functioning on the job, and thus carries some real costs for the individual worker, the people affected by him or her, and for the organization as a whole. While some people may quit the job as a result of burnout, others will stay on but will only do the bare minimum rather than their very best.

Burnout was recognized as an important social problem by practitioners long before it became a focus of systematic study by researchers. Thus, it was more of a "grass-roots" phenomenon, grounded in the realities of people's experiences in the workplace, rather than a topic derived from a scholarly theory and empirical studies. This pragmatic conceptual framework – of a social problem that needed to be solved – shaped the trajectory of the research on burnout. The early studies followed a "bottom-up" approach of describing and defining the phenomenon, and developing hypotheses about its causes and its effects. Later, this initial work was linked to a wide variety of theoretical perspectives and research literatures in social, clinical, and industrial/organizational psychology (see reviews by Maslach & Schaufeli, 1993; Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998).

An underlying theme of this pragmatic framework has been to discover solutions to the problem of burnout. From the beginning, the growing research literature was matched (or even outstripped) by a parallel literature of workshop and self-help materials. As burnout became more clearly identified as a form of job stress, it received increasing attention from administrators and policy makers in the workplace. It is thus fair to say that the field of job burnout has always had a primary thrust toward application, in addition to scholarly contributions.

Our recent work has been explicitly designed to bridge the gap between basic and applied research on burnout. Our goal has been to design tools that can be used by both researchers and practitioners – the former to study hypotheses within the context of field studies, and the latter to assess the workplace within the context of organizational interventions. Toward that end, we have developed a new model that draws on the extant research literature on job stress and proposes that six areas of job-person mismatch are the critical sources of burnout (Maslach & Leiter, 1997). We have now developed a new tool to assess these six areas, which can be used as part of a program of organizational assessment and intervention (Leiter & Maslach, 2000). This chapter will provide a comprehensive analysis of our model and measures, and will demonstrate how we are using this approach both for empirical tests and applied interventions.

BURNOUT AND ENGAGEMENT

Burnout is defined as a psychological syndrome of exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy, which is experienced in response to chronic job stressors. This definition is a broader statement of the multidimensional model that has been predominant in the burnout field (Maslach, 1993, 1998; Maslach & Jackson, 1981). The original model emerged from research with workers in human service and educational occupations, and thus was framed in terms of the interpersonal relationships that characterize such jobs. However, more recent work has established that the basic model can be broadened to apply to any kind of occupation (Leiter & Schaufeli, 1996; Maslach et al., 1996).

Of the three dimensions of burnout, the exhaustion component represents the basic individual stress experience. It refers to feelings of being overextended and depleted of one's emotional and physical resources. The cynicism component represents the interpersonal context dimension of burnout. It refers to a negative, callous, or excessively detached response to various aspects of the job. It usually develops in response to the overload of exhaustion, and is self-protective, at first, as an emotional buffer of "detached concern." But the risk is that the detachment can result in the loss of idealism and the dehumanization of others. This detachment, or distancing, is such an immediate reaction to exhaustion that a strong relationship from exhaustion to cynicism is found consistently in burnout research, across a wide range of organizational and occupational settings (Maslach et al., 1996). The third component of inefficacy represents the self-evaluation dimension of burnout. It refers to feelings of incompetence and a lack of achievement and productivity in work. In some instances, it appears to be a function, to some degree, of either exhaustion or cynicism, or a combination of the two (Byrne, 1993; Lee & Ashforth, 1996). A work situation with chronic, overwhelming demands that contribute to exhaustion or cynicism is likely to erode one's sense of effectiveness. However, in other job contexts, inefficacy appears to develop in parallel with the other two burnout aspects, rather than sequentially (Leiter, 1993). Here the lack of efficacy seems to arise more clearly from a lack of relevant resources, while exhaustion and cynicism emerge from the presence of work overload and social conflict.

Unlike acute stress reactions, which develop in response to specific critical incidents, burnout is a cumulative reaction to ongoing occupational stressors. With burnout, the emphasis has been more on the process of psychological erosion, and the psychological and social outcomes of this chronic exposure, rather than just the physical ones. Because burnout is a prolonged response to chronic interpersonal stressors on the job, it tends to be fairly stable over time.

Burnout is one end of a continuum in the relationship people establish with their jobs. As a syndrome of exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy, it stands in

contrast to the energetic, involved, and effective state of engagement with work. Recently, the multidimensional model of burnout has been expanded to this other end of the continuum (Leiter & Maslach, 1998). Engagement is defined in terms of the same three dimensions as burnout, but the positive end of those dimensions rather than the negative. Thus, engagement consists of a state of high energy (rather than exhaustion), strong involvement (rather than cynicism), and a sense of efficacy (rather than inefficacy).

Engagement is distinct from established constructs in organizational psychology such as organizational commitment, job satisfaction, or job involvement. Organizational commitment refers to an employee's allegiance to the organization that provides employment. The focus is on the organization, whereas engagement focuses on the work itself. Job satisfaction is the extent to which work is a source of need fulfillment and contentment, or a means of freeing employees from hassles or dissatisfiers; it does not encompass the person's relationship with the work itself. Job involvement is similar to the involvement aspect of engagement with work, but does not include the energy and effectiveness dimensions. Thus, engagement provides a more complex and thorough perspective on an individual's relationship with work.

In terms of application, the concept of engagement may be more functional than burnout. A worksetting that is designed to support the positive development of the three core qualities of energy, involvement, and effectiveness should be successful in promoting the well-being and productivity of its employees. Thus, we have found that a focus on what would promote engagement in the workplace is a better framework for developing effective interventions than a focus simply on what would reduce stress. Moreover, the former is more likely to change the job context, while the latter leads to strategies of changing the person.

The Organizational Context for Burnout and Engagement

Job stress has been recognized as a significant occupational hazard, which can impair both health and work performance (e.g. Sauter & Murphy, 1995). The worker's internal experience of stress is assumed to play a mediating role between the impact of external job demands (stressors) and work-related outcomes (such as absenteeism or illness). This basic mediation model should be especially true of the stress phenomenon of burnout, which involves a prolonged response to chronic interpersonal job stressors. Thus, organizational conditions should influence a worker's experience of burnout or engagement, which in turn will determine outcomes of importance to both the worker and the organization. For example, assessments of employees' level of experienced burnout or engagement

have predicted clients' evaluation of service quality (Leiter et al., 1998) and employees' evaluation of organizational change (Leiter & Harvie, 1998).

Two decades of research on burnout have identified a plethora of organizational risk factors across many occupations in various countries, as well as some work-related outcomes (see Maslach et al., 2001; Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998). However, there has not been much research that directly tested the mediation model by including measures of all three model components: organizational factors, experienced burnout, and work-related outcomes. One of our recent studies was designed as a first approximation of such a test (Leiter & Maslach, 2003).

In this chapter, we will present not only this initial study on the mediation model, but the psychometric research that led to the development of a key measure of organizational factors, the Areas of Worklife Scale. Our goal has been to develop research tools that are also appropriate for use in applied settings, and this requires measures that are relatively brief and easily accessible to a wide range of employees. The standard measure of burnout, the Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach et al., 1996), already meets those criteria. However, there was not a comparable tool that assesses the multiple job stressors that contribute to burnout, so our challenge was to devise a measure of these organizational factors.

Six Areas of Worklife

In reviewing the proliferation of organizational correlates in many studies of burnout and job stress, we had identified six key domains: workload, control, reward, community, fairness, and values (Leiter & Maslach, 1999; Maslach & Leiter, 1997, 1999). The first two areas are reflected in the Demand-Control model of job stress (Karasek & Theorell, 1990), and reward refers to the power of reinforcements to shape behavior. Community captures all of the work on social support and interpersonal conflict, while fairness emerges from the literature on equity and social justice. Finally, the area of values picks up the cognitive-emotional power of job goals and expectations.

Workload

The most obvious, and most commonly discussed area of worklife is overload: job demands exceeding human limits. People have to do too much in too little time with too few resources. Increasing workload has a consistent relationship with burnout, especially with the exhaustion dimension (Cordes & Dougherty, 1993; Maslach et al., 2001; Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998). Structural models of burnout have shown that exhaustion then mediates the relationship of workload with the other two dimensions of burnout (Lee & Ashforth, 1996; Leiter & Harvie, 1998).